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AUTHOR Freeman, Jayne
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ABSTRACT

Is the criticism of today's public schools and its employees unwarranted? This document highlights some data that cast the performance of American public schools in a more favorable light. Contrary to popular belief, today's students compare favorably with those in the past and with students in other countries. A higher percentage of American students complete high school than ever before, and many go on to college. Students who directly enter the workplace are generally well prepared. The digest traces the decline in SAT scores to changes in the demographics of test takers, and shows how comparisons with other nations do not reflect cultural differences. For example, in many countries the tests are taken by an elite group of students who have more hours of instruction and practice than students in the United States. Nearly 60 percent of American students progress to postsecondary studies and about 26 percent receive bachelor's degrees. Finally, social and economic conditions have a large influence on the educational system's ability to perform its task. (LMI)

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What's Right with Schools

By Jayne Freeman

Public schools today and the people who work in them are the targets of widespread criticism. But is this criticism warranted? Ample evidence supports a more positive view. The purpose of this ERIC Digest is to highlight some data that cast the performance of schools in a more favorable light.*

Contrary to popular belief, today's students compare favorably with those in the past and with students in other countries. A higher percentage of American students complete high school than ever before, and many go on to college. Students who directly enter the workplace are generally well prepared.

How Do Today's Students Compare with Those in the Past?

Analyses of SAT and other test scores show that today's students compare favorably with past students. A cursory analysis of SAT test score data reveals that the average SAT score has declined from 940 in the 1970s to about 900 in 1992. A closer look shows that this decline reflects a change in the demographics of the test population. A larger percentage of seniors attempted the SAT in 1992 than in previous years, but fewer of them were in the top 20 percent of their class. More students in the lower 60 percent of their class took the test, which lowered the average scores. The decline in scores may not be indicative, therefore, of a deterioration in the quality of schools.

A better way to judge the performance of schools would be to compare test takers of the past and present who were alike in class ranking. This is what researchers at the Sandia Laboratories did (Carson and others 1993). They selected a group of students from the 1990 SAT test takers who matched in gender and class ranking those students who took the test in 1975. When the researchers compared the two groups' average scores, the 1990 group outscored the 1975 group by 30 points.

Other tests such as the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) indicate that today's students score at least as well as their parents. The Sandia study found that NAEP scores of nine-, thirteen-, and seventeen-year-olds made steady gains in reading and math from 1971 to 1988. Other studies show that in areas such as social studies, students know about as much as previous groups.

How Do Our Students Compare with Students in Other Countries?

Students in other countries generally score higher than American students on tests of reading, math, and science, but because of cultural and other differences, these scores may lead to erroneous conclusions.

The 1991 Second International Assessment of Educational Progress placed American thirteen-year-olds in fourteenth out of fifteen places, but the Educational Testing Service warned against using international test results for comparisons because of cultural differences. In many countries, an elite group takes the test, whereas our test population includes all students in the age group.

Another difference is in the number of hours of schooling. Japanese students, for example, attend school more days per year and have more hours of afterschool study. Therefore, having more hours of instruction and practice in a given subject than American students the same age, the Japanese students naturally tend to score higher.

Top American students, however, outscore their counterparts from other nations in math. Recently, the National Center for Education Statistics transformed international assessment data into NAEP scales. Bracey (1994) then combined these data with other data from the 1992 NAEP mathematics assessment to obtain the following ranking of students: (1) Asian U.S., (2) Taiwanese, (3) Korean, (4) advantaged urban U.S., (5) white U.S., and (6) Hungarian. Bracey notes, "Whites and Asians together make up over 70% of the K-12 population of U.S. schools." This means that the majority of American students score well on these international math comparisons.

An opposing viewpoint is that of Harold Stevenson (1993), who tested hundreds of American, Chinese, and Japanese students in reading and math and concluded that the Asian students consistently excelled. He stated, "Clearly an achievement gap exists between

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American and Asian students. Part of the reason for this gap is that American students, their parents and their teachers maintain unnecessarily low standards for performance."

Some tests comparing *all* American students of a certain age with those of other countries show our students doing well. In 1992 the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement compared reading skills of 200,000 students in 31 countries. American nine-year-olds ranked second on this test, and fourteen-year-olds ranked ninth.

How Many Students Complete High School and College?

High school completion rates have increased over the past twenty years, as has the percentage of students who go on to college. According to the National Center for Education Statistics, the *event* dropout rate from high school (measured for a single year) in grades 10-12 was 6.7 percent in 1978, compared with 4.5 percent in 1993 (McMillen and others 1994). When delayed graduations and GED figures are included, 86 percent of American students age 21-22 completed high school in 1993, compared with 82 percent in 1972.

The same study shows that dropout rates are closely connected to family income. Among students whose family incomes rank in the bottom fifth, the *status* dropout rate (those who have not completed high school and are not enrolled) was 24 percent in 1993, compared with 10 percent for those with incomes in the top three-fifths, and 3 percent for the top fifth.

Nearly 60 percent of U.S. high school graduates go on to post-secondary studies, and about 26 percent receive bachelor's degrees, a larger percentage than in other industrialized countries. In a sense, education in this country is a sixteen-year rather than a twelve-year process. Subjects like calculus, taught in high school in many countries, tend to be taught in college in the U.S., complicating international comparisons of high school students in those subjects.

How Well Are U.S. Students Prepared for the Workplace?

Many students go directly from high school to the workplace, and a number of myths exist about how well they are prepared for employment. Do schools fail to prepare students for the workplace, as is frequently charged?

Preparation of students for the workplace should be based on skills employers require. According to studies by the Michigan Education Department and the Rochester (New York) School District (cited in Carson and others 1993), employers are looking primarily for punctuality, respect for others, ability to follow directions, and honesty. Basic academic skills are among the least important skills for employment.

Contrary to some myths, businesses generally do not spend employee training dollars on remediating skills not learned in school. Carson and his colleagues report that businesses spend fewer than 10 percent of their training dollars on entry-level workers, and even less on basic skills training.

These data do not mean that all high school graduates are prepared to enter the work force. Robinson and Brandon (1992) suggest that business spend little on remedial training because they hire workers who already have the required skills.

A number of high schools nationwide offer innovative programs to help students develop workplace skills and make appropriate career choices.

What Effect Do Social Conditions Have on Education?

Social and economic conditions have a larger effect on the educational system's ability to perform its task than most people realize. Hungry, emotionally disturbed, abused, or unhealthy students are obviously unable to focus their attention wholeheartedly on instruction. Harold Hodgkinson (1993) points out that "in 1993 more than 23% of America's children were living below the poverty line and thus were at risk of failing to fulfill their physical and mental promise."

Educating our children must be seen as everyone's responsibility.

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